

USE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION BY CHRISTIAN RELIGION TO TRAIN, EDIFY AND EDUCATE ADHERENTS

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ABSTRACT

Distance Education has been growing fast, in a marvelously diverse fashion. The efficiency, effectiveness, validity and utility of distance teaching-learning are on increase. All communities and religious groups are making use of distance learning methodology to upgrade their knowledge, skills and attitudes. Christian educational institutions in all the parts of the world are being benefitted by the Christian distance education programme. Christian websites make up more than 80 percent of the websites of the world's five major religions. Globalisation is facilitating many Christian pioneers of multiple denominations to adopt distance teaching-learning beyond all frontiers and barriers. Baker's guide to Christian Distance Education profiles upto 150 Christian degree programmes. Some of the popular programmes are indicated here.

Christians who constitute 2.33 percent of Indian population are educationally benefitted by Christian distance education programmes. A major Christian distance education programme is offered by Andhra Christian Theological College. Its four distance courses attract students all over the country.

How quality is important in distance teaching and learning is highlighted here.

Keywords: Christian distance education, Baker's Guide to Christian Distance Education, Christian distance education in India, Andhra Christian Theological College, Distance education challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Having nearly two billion adherents, Christians, with their affiliated seminaries, colleges and universities have become the most active in using applications of distance learning. Zaleski reported in 1997: "Christian websites made up more than 80 percent of the websites of the world's five major religions".

Interestingly enough, the educational institutions sponsored by Christian churches rank among the largest sponsors of these websites. The Christian emphasis on education is also reflected in the thousands of institutions of higher education that are Christian affiliated and/or sponsored.

Pope John Paul II in his message at the XXXV World Communication Day encouraged the use of the “positive capacities of the Internet to carry religious information and teaching beyond all barriers and frontiers”. When making the official announcement about the debut of the Catholic Information Centre on the Internet the Archbishop Martino said: “for the church to fulfil her mission of teaching and serving all mankind, it is appropriate she makes use of technology, that offers and possibility of immediate, in-depth communication with the entire world”.

This vision of being able to reach beyond all barriers and frontiers has been one of the motivations of the many Christian pioneers of multiple denominations to adopt distance learning.

Baker's Guide to Christian Distance Education profiles up to 150 Christian distance degree programmes. A few expels of the growing number of these programmes are outlined below.

- The Catholic Distance University has enrolled over 10,000 students in its correspondence courses since 1983 and is now launching an online programme. In additional, 25 Jesuit-affiliated universities have collaborated to create a type of virtual university, which currently offers 190 online courses in 35 programmes to about 8,500 students each year.
- The Seventh Day Adventist Church has founded one of the oldest (1903) distance education programme in the world, Home Study International. In 1990 it renamed its college division Griggs University, enrolling 950 students in 113 undergraduate independent study courses in 2003, of which 10 percent are computer based. In 1999, the Adventist Virtual Learning Network Consortium created a web portal, now offering 124 courses from Adventist affiliated colleges and universities.
- The Assemblies of God Church has created an exclusive distance education provider called Global University which now offers to more than 178 countries around the world, in more than 145 languages through Internet, correspondence and international study centers.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints offers a series of worldwide leadership training broadcasts. The Church trains lay-clergy in nearly 200 countries via satellite broadcasts, simultaneously translated into over 50 languages.
- Brigham Young University began its correspondence programme in 1921. Seeing a strong connection between faith and reason, spiritual and secular education, it is now emerged as one of the largest correspondence programmes of its kind in North America.
- Seminary Extension, a ministry of the six theological seminaries of Southern Baptist Convention provides Biblical, Theological and Practical education to Christians wherever they live via Internet, CD-Rom, local live classrooms and correspondence. Nearly 4,000 students take Seminary Extension courses through 500 Extension centres and/or through independent study.

- The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America through its seminaries, the Private Financial for Lutherans, and the Augsburg Fortress Publishers combined their efforts to create The Fishers' Net, a eLearning provider. Currently it has around 2000 users.
- Moody Bible Institute has been providing online courses. It started in 1886 and formed a correspondence department in 1901. It has a total of over one million enrolments since its origin.
- Warwick Institute of Education of the University of Warwick offers two part-time courses in religious education by distance learning. The courses are the MA in Religious Education and the Post graduate certificate in Religious education. For each module, students are given access to an online study guide, written by course team members. The study guide contains links to selected articles and book chapters, some written by course team. Students also have access to electronic resources including ebooks and journal articles via the library website.
- Freedom Bible College and Seminary is the home of quality education with distance learning and resident campuses around the world. It offers all accredited Bible degrees at low tuition costs.

It is an interdenominational Bible School and is accepted by most Christian organizations as a high quality source of Bible education.

- Life Bible School enables students to obtain internationally recognized degrees and diplomas through programmes specifically designed to meet the needs of web-enabled, busy students interested in reading nations for Christ through life recovery and healing mission, Christian and pastoral counseling.
- Trinity College of Biblical Studies is a tuition free Bible College. All the class materials are available by online students, CD-Rom studies, and correspondence. Students upon completion of the undergraduate studies will graduate with Bachelor of Biblical Studies and receive ordination.
- The University of Glasgow offers a part-time certificate in Religious Education by distance learning. It is recognized by the Bishops of Scotland as a preliminary qualification in generalist Catholic Religious Education for students who wish to teach Religious Education in catholic primary or secondary schools and who were unable to attend the Faculty of Education of University of Glasgow. The Certificate course offers an exciting online learning opportunity, set in the University's stimulating MOODLE learning environment.
- 12 Universities in the UK offers 45 distance learning religious degree courses. For example the University of Walden runs a number of programmes.
- Australian Catholic University offers units in theology by distance mode to enable persons to reflect more deeply upon the Christian tradition and Christian faith in the comfort of homes. The University offers Graduate Theological Studies online, which explore mainline Christian theology in the catholic tradition in ministry, religious education and spiritual formation.
- Prairie Bible Institute in Alberta, Canada offers distance education programmes in Theology.

- Institute for Christian Studies in keeping with its commitment to education that is globally accessible, is working to offer an increasingly number of courses in distance mode. The courses employ a mix of print-based materials and online support. Biblical Foundations, Christianity and Ecological Crisis, Leadership, Vision and Mission, Religion, Life and Society, Reformation Philosophy are some of the popular courses.
- International Christian College in Scotland offers the certificate of Christian Studies. Successfully passing this certificate course allows access to the second year of BA. Theology programme or BA youth work with Applied Theology programme. Successfully passing the certificate course also allows access to continue distance learning through Open Theological College.
- London School of Theology offers a wide range of distance learning modules that can go towards and validated qualification or individual modules can be studied for personal development.
- Spurgeons College has developed an extreme portfolio of open learning courses and also partners with the University of Wales to offer the Doctor of Ministry Course.
- All the courses in Theology by Midlands Bible College an open or distance learning courses.
- Nazarene Theological College offer distance learning courses for postgraduates and short modular courses for undergraduates that can build up towards diplomas or degrees.
- Eckhart Theological Seminary provides quality distance theology education through the Ph.D level
- Institute of Theological Studies develops church leaders through distance education. It develops graduate level distance mode theological education courses for personal enrichment or credit through accredited evangelical seminaries.
- Pillsbury College and Seminary is a graduate school for pastors, counsellors and other ministers. Distance learning Master's and Doctoral Degree in Christian Counseling psychology, Biblical counseling, Biblical studies and Christian theology.

Now we would move to Indian scene.

INDIAN SCENE

India is a multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual country. It is the second biggest country in the world in terms of population. The population according to 2011 census is 121 crores.

The Constitution of India has a chapter on Fundamental Rights of people, one of the most elaborate charters of human rights yet framed by any State consistent with the aim of the unity of the nation and the interests of the public at large.

These Fundamental Rights substantially cover all the traditional civil and political rights. Articles 25 to 28 of the Constitution provide to all persons guarantees of the right to freedom of religion in all its aspects. Article 25 lays down that all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion.

Article 26 which flows from Article 25, bestows a rights on all religious denominations and sections thereof to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes, to manage their own affairs in matters of religion, to own and acquire and administer property. Article 28 forbids totally any religious instruction being imparted in educational institutions wholly maintained by State funds.

In case of other institutions recognized and aided by State, there will be freedom for every person not to participate in religious instruction or worship.

In conformity with Constitutions principles, different religious groups practice their religions in their own way. One form of practicing religion is to establish institutions to teach their religion principles and practices. Most of these institutions offer compus based courses, while only a few offer courses at a distance. Majority of Indians adhere to Hinduism as shown below

**Table: 1
Distribution of Indian Population by Religion**

Hindus	80.44%
Muslims	13.42%
Christians	2.33%
Sikhs	1.84%
Buddhists	0.68%
Jains	0.38%
Others	0.65%

Institutions imparting Hindu religious education by distance mode are not only in India but also in abroad. The Hindu University of America, the Bhasktivedanta Institute of Science and a few Veda colleges in the USA based on modern research and ancient wisdom taught at a distance. Sri Sathya Sai Veda Pratishtam is setting up a virtual Veda University. They have brought up all Veda Sakhas, sacred writings, including 96 Upanishads onto the portal.

The Hindu University of America has launched a distance education programme offering Master's and Doctoral degree in three areas (Hinduism, Hindu Philosophies and yoga philosophy and meditation).

Christians who constitute 2.33 percent of Indian population have strong traditions of imparting Christian education through institutional channels. Serampore College (University) in West Bengal is one such prominent religious educational institution.

Inspired by the Serampore institution, Andhra Christian Theological College (ACTC) initiated a few regular and distance programmes. The ACTC is now emerging as a prominent distance Christian education centre in India.

Andhra Christian Theological College

In response to the ecumenical vision of the churches in Andhra Pradesh, the Andhra Christian Theological College (ACTC) was founded in 1964 by amalgamation of three of its allied theological institutions (The Andhra Luthern Theological College at Rajahumndary, The Andhra United Theological College at Dornakal and the Baptist Theological College at Kakinada). In 1967 ACTC was enlarged by the inclusion of the Ramapatnam Baptist Theological College.

Later some other churches joined the ACTC. The first home of the ACTC was Rajahmundry. In 1973, the ACTC moved to Hyderabad, the capital city of Andhra Pradesh. The college offers courses prescribed by the Senate of Serampore College (University). The courses are two types:

- Internal Courses, and
- External/distance courses.

Internal Courses are:

- Bachelor of Theology
- Bachelor of Divinity
- Master of Divinity
- Master of Theology

External Courses are:

- Bachelor of Christian Studies
- Diploma in Christian Studies
- Diploma in Bible Training
- Master of Ministries

Distance students have good experience, commitment and marvelous background. Degree of Bachelor of Christian Studies and Diploma in Christian Studies are designed as;

- to provide Christian professionals and laity with academic skills for the in-depth understanding of Christian faith, history, doctrine and practical dimensions of ministry and
- b) to enable them to interact with their neighbors' and professional colleagues in the common quest for meaning in life.

The courses are intended to integrate theological education with the professional orientation of students. The specific objectives of Bachelor of Christian Studies are;

- to develop Kingdom of God perspective in theological education,
- to create critical consciousness and openness to analyze and inculcate cultural, socio-economic, political and ecclesial values,
- to enable persons to become effective witnesses in the context of their varied and diversified ministries, and
- to promote theological education as a transforming influence in personal and social life.

The specific objectives of Diploma, in Christian Studies are to provide an opportunity in India for the study of:

- Bible and its formation, interpretation and significance for Christian faith,
- history, faith and practice of Christianity,
- life, teaching and work of Jesus,
- interaction of Christianity with people of other faiths and the cultures.

The method of instruction comprises;

- **supply course material**
- **allotment of Faculty members for each course,**
- **organization of contact programmes at stipulated periods.**

Bachelor Degree course consists of 13 compulsory and 7 optional courses. Diploma course consists of 6 compulsory and 4 optional courses.

The duration of Degree Course is 4 years and of Diploma Course is 1 Year.

The ACTC is trying to reform, reshape and revitalize its distance courses.

**Table: 2
Enrolment of Distance Students in ACTC**

S.No.	Prgramme	2009	2010	2011
1	Bachelor of Theology	139	138	162
2	Diploma in Christian Studies	50	81	93
3	Diploma in Bible Training	-	18	05
4	Master of Ministries	-	-	13
	Total	189	237	273

Distance Education Challenges

It is not possible to specify what form of distance education will work with what learners.

In a situation where the audience for distance learning continues to expand and change, investigation of potential of students and sensitivity to their situation is necessary for each different environment. However, some generalizations are possible and useful.

- **Media and technology that are accessible to learners should be chosen**
- **Financial cost of learners should be affordable**
- **Time requirements should be realistic**
- **Study arrangements should take into account educational background**
- **Learning support should be accessible to all on regular basis**
- **Learning systems should cater for different learning styles**
- **Student motivation influenced by student values and aspirations is an important factor in participation and completion**

Distance education must use information and communication technologies greatly to enrich it. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can support learning in a number of ways. It can facilitate communication, increase access to information, provide greater access to learning for students with special education needs, model and simulate a range of specific phenomena, and generally motivate students, develop problem solving capabilities and aid deeper understanding.

Distance education institutions must maintain and assure quality. Quality assurance refers to the systems through which an institution demonstrates that conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards set in educational programmes.

A quality assurance system includes all those planned and systematic activities which provide confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for quality. The scope of quality assurance system varies widely. Some monitor teaching effectiveness while others focus on management processes.

Quality assurance in distance education serves several purposes:

- to satisfy the need for accountability for funds used,
- to ensure that defined standards will be reliably achieved and that awards have credibility,
- to inform decision making when setting standards
- to improve quality of standards in programme provision, service delivery, operations, student learning and institutional performance,
- to provide reference points, internal and external, past and present, for judging performance,
- to provide evidence of achievement in relation to competitors,
- to gain public confidence, and
- to ensure programme information and at registration

CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDS

Many Christian distance education providers do not maintain high standards. Many Christian distance education programmes lack quality. Use of ICT in them is very limited. Distance education institutions must maintain and assure quality. Quality assurance in distance education serves several purposes, mainly, improving quality of standards in programme offers, service delivery, student learning and institutional performance.

The demand for quality has prompted open distance education organisations and associations to develop criteria to assist quality assurance factors. AAOU, COL, UNESCO provides comprehensive information about quality assurance guidelines and practices.

Although quality assurance guidelines classify its components in different ways, all guidelines stress the importance of policy planning, human resources, programmes, learning materials, student support and student assessment. Quality in distance education is frequently judged in terms of learning materials because of student learning is all the centre of the distance education experience. Success depends on how effectively course production, delivery and student support sub-system operate, underpinned by academic standards and management processes.

BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of the AUTHORS



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